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ABSTRACT

In order to rate the importance of elements involved in a public relations curriculum, a study analyzed the responses of public relations educators from all academic associations teaching the subject as well as practitioners from all specializations. Questionnaires were sent to 544 people who rated 110 elements as not essential to essential on a scale from one through seven. Marketing, print communication processes, publicity and media relations, journalism skills, and goal setting were rated as the most important topics to be covered in a public relations course. Other topics, programs, or courses rated six or higher were (1) writing for mass communication, (2) a business minor, (3) the nature and role of public relations, (4) electronic communication processes, (5) measuring program effectiveness, (6) ethics, (7) management, (8) audience segmentation, (9) evaluation, (10) research, (11) measurement tools, (12) credibility, (13) social forces, (14) problem analysis, (15) community relations, (16) budgeting, (17) duties of practitioners, and (18) employee relations. (SRT)

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"THE RESEARCH BASE FOR A PUBLIC RELATIONS CURRICULUM: A NATIONAL SURVEY OF TOPICS "ESSENTIAL" TO A PUBLIC RELATIONS CURRICULUM"

by

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A report of research conducted for the Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations Education under the co-chairmanship of Betsy Ann Plank, APR and William Ehling, Ph.D., 1985-86.

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Public relations educators from all academic associations teaching the subject as well as practitioners from all specializations, both younger and senior people, agree on mastery of the language and practical experience as the two most important elements in a public relations education. Responses from 544 leaders responding to a mail questionnaire sponsored by the Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations Education rated the importance of 110 elements commonly involved in a public relations curriculum.

Mean Scores on a "not essential to essential" 1-7 scale rated marketing, print communication processes, publicity and media relations, journalism skills, and goal setting as the more important topics that should be covered in a public relations education.

Other topics or courses rating 6 or higher on the 1-7 scale were: writing for Mass Communication, a Business minor, the nature and role of public relations, electronic communication processes, measuring program effectiveness, ethics, management, audience segmentation, evaluation, research, measurement tools, credibility, social forces, problem analysis, commmunity relations, budgeting, duties of practitioner and employee relations.

A factor analysis examined 68 of these course parts--those covered in the public relations major courses--and identified 6 factors. These 68 variables subjected to factor analysis were the "topics" covered in seven popular textbooks and were identified under 14 categories--principal subjects--within public relations education. The factor analysis reordered the 68 course parts into a new set of categories based on a correlation of each of the 68 variables with new hypothetical variables(factors). The procedure produced 6 of these new hypothetical variables or factors which we have labeled as follows: 1) Administration 2) Tools and Techniques 3) Duties 4) Specializations 5) Communication Theory, and 6) Planning and Evaluation. As we will discuss later these factors offer an alternative structure for public relations education.

In the 1975 "Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education" the seven members of the commission co-chaired by J. Carroll Bateman and Scott Cutlip proposed a curriculum standard for the full range of academic programs offering education in public relations. The published report of that commission reflected the point of view of its members alone as to what should constitute such a curriculum. This paper reports the 1985-86 effort of the Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations Education to build a research base on which to update that 1975 Design for Public Relations Education."

METHODOLOGY

The population of interest consisted of educators affiliated with four academic associations(AEJMC, IABC, ICA, SCA) concerned with public relations education,[1] and practitioners affiliated with Public Relations Society of America at two levels: Associate Members who have been in practice two years or less and Senior Practitioners including those who were members of the Educational Affairs Committee, the Accreditation Board, the Continuing Education Board and Friends of PRSSA.

A systematic random sample was chosen from those in PRSA who fit these selection ctiteria. Dr. William Ehling, who compiled the list of PRSA members, also made an effort to include persons from each area of public relations specialization. To this list was added all educator members of PRSA. Members of the commission from the other organizations supplied lists of public relations educators from their respective memberships. After duplicate names were deleted, about 1,500 questionnaires were mailed to the composite list;[2] 544 responses were analyzed for a total response rate of 36.29 percent. Funding limitations precluded follow-up mailings, and each respondent supplied return envelope and postage.

In order to measure general perceptions of what should make up an ideal curriculum, the research team chose not to study course titles or semester hours, in favor of an analysis of curriculum content: "topics" or "course parts" which should be covered in an approved program. To develop a sufficiently

comprehensive list of topics the research team wrote on 3 by 5 cards those topics covered in seven public relations textbooks.[3] These topics were then arranged on a table top to allow the authors to combine and correlate topics so as to arrive at a list broad enough to encompass the full range of course parts considered important to public relations education.

A questionnaire based on the list of topics was developed by structuring the course parts under eight headings: 1) Origins and Principles of Public Relations, 2) Specializations, 3) Public Relations Research, 4) Public Relations Planning, 5) Public Relations Ethics and Law, 6) Public Relations Actions and Implementation, 7) Public Relations Communication, and 8) Public Relations Performance Evaluation/Measurement.

To measure perceptions of the total scope of the educational experience five additional headings were added: a. Courses in Liberal Arts and General Education, b. Freshman/Sophomore Year Requirements, c. Minor, d. Key Business Courses, and e. Courses in Related Disciplines. To every topic listed under each heading--including both public relations course parts and courses or fields under these five additional headings--was added a one-way seven point scale from 1=not essential to 7=essential. A write-in "other" category at the end of each heading allowed the respondent to indicate any topic that he felt should be added to the heading. Most additions duplicated topics listed elsewhere in the questionnaire.

The list of topics numbered 124, including Public Relations Internship/Practicum/Work-study which was listed as a separate topic without a heading. Demographic items identified the respondent as: PR Educator, Associate member PRSA, Member PRSA, Accredited Member PRSA, IABC Member, AEJMC Member, ICA Member, or SCA Member. Additional categories were labeled, Other professional membership, Years teaching public relations, and Years of practicing public relations.

FINDINGS

Two "topics" stand out as most "essential" in undergraduate public relations education: English and Internship. These two variables drew the highest mean-score ratings of all, both scoring 6.67 on the 1 to 7 scale. Facility with the language is considered the most important attribute for a career in public relations. Of equal importance is an opportunity for practical experience as a part of educational preparation.

Twenty-three other topics rated mean-scores of 6.0 or higher on the seven point scale. In order of highest to lowest these are:

Marketing, as a key business course(6.54). Knowledge of marketing is extremely helpful to many public relations practitioners involved in supporting marketing programs or who perform product oriented functions. This may account for this

topic's receiving the highest rating after English and Internship. Associate members of PRSA and IABC members rated it highest(6.75 and 6.70) and senior practitioners rated it lowest(6.36).

Planning, Writing, Producing and Delivering Print Communications to Audiences(6.51). The basic written communication process from planning to delivery is percieved as essential to the public relations person. This "Print" communication topic rated higher than "Electronic"-- under this "Communication" heading. Associate and younger practitioners(6.75, 6.62) together with educators(6.55 to 6.58) gave this a higher rating than senior practitioners(6.36)i.e. those with 13+ years practice.

Publicity and Media Relations(6.43). The high rating of this traditional public relations "Specialization" may surprise those who say the era of publicity and media relations has ended. However, Associates(6.65) and younger members--with less than 13 years practice--(6.50) gave this topic a higher rating than seniors--with 13+ years practice--(6.32) or Accredited members(6.26). This function remains a foundation even when more lofty management concerns may dominate the practitioner's attention.

Courses in Journalism as a Related Discipline(6.43). Respondents were asked to rate other courses found in communication schools, and traditional Journalism was at the top of that list. When the high rating of English is compared with

this rating, writing skills are, clearly, essential. While all demographic segments in the study rated this topic above 6.00 on the 1 to 7 scale, Associates(6.77) rated it higher than senior practitioners(6.17).

Setting Goals, Objectives, Strategies, Tactics(6.40). All topics under "Planning" rated high but this item was in first place by a wide margin. SCA(6.80), ICA(6.77) and all educators(6.66 to 6.62) rated this higher than Accredited(6.33) or senior practitioners(6.30). Audience segmentation came next under the heading with an over all mean of 6.15.

Writing for Mass Communication as a Freshman/Sophomore course(6.40). A high rating of an introductory course on the basic writing skills for all the media emphasizes again the critical need for mastery of writing. The 135 Associate member respondents rated this highest(6.67) while senior educators with 8+ years teaching gave it the lowest at 6.21.

Business as a Minor Area of Study(6.36) In response to the question of what is the most desirable minor subject for the public relaitons student, "Business" as a general area--as opposed to specific courses such as marketing--rated highest. Other preferred minor areas included English(5.56), and Social Science(4.94). Junior practitioners(6.46), Associates(6.45) AEJMC members(6.44) and IABC members(6.43) rated a business minor higher than senior practitioners(6.24) or SCA members(6.20).

Nature and Role of Public Relations: Definitions(6.27). In a field where even the experts cannot agree on a definition

students must at least grapple with what the term means. Senior educators--with 8+years teaching--give this the highest rating(6.71) while senior practitioners give it the lowest(6.24).

Planning, Writing, Producing and Delivering Audiovisual, Electronic and Multimedia Communication to Audiences(6.27). Under the "Communication" tasks of the practitioner this rates second, behind the same process for print. Young practitioners gave this a higher rating(6.62) than senior people(6.36) but both agreed this is a more important function in communication than the next highest which was employee/internal communication with an over all rating of 5.87.

Measuring Program Effectiveness(6.27). The high rating of all evaluation items indicate that this function is becoming more and more important; bottom line success is important in "Performance Evaluation." Results-based planning came second under this heading at 6.13 with little variation among any of the demographic groupings of respondents.

Ethics, Codes of Practice: PR Media, Business, Law, Accounting, Medicine, Government, etc.(6.22). This high rating of ethics affirms the importance of understanding the ethical standards in whatever field one may practice. The importance of high standards of ethical practice is perceived as slightly more essential by younger members of PRSA(6.45) than by either accredited members(6.23) or regular members of PRSA(6.12).

Management as a Key Business Course(6.19). This topic rated second among business courses behind marketing. Many definitions of public relations have called it a management function; our respondents agree. Yet, educators(6.37) and IABC members(6.42) rate management higher than do senior practitioners(6.10).

Audience Segmentation(6.15). After goal setting, this rates second under the "Planning" heading as an important function, reflecting a growing interest in communication efficiency. SCA members rated this highest(6.75) and senior practitoners rated it lowest at 6.03).

Decision Making Based on Results(6.13). As the second highest rated function under "Evaluation" the ability to profit from past successes and failures is rated higher by educators (6.28) than by old pros and young practitioners(6.10).

Public Relations Research Designs/Processes/Techniques (6.12). All research items rated highly, but ability to design a research effort was most essential. ICA(6.61) and SCA(6.60) gave this the highest rating and senior practitoners(6.04) and regular PRSA members(6.09) gave it the lowest rating.

Tools/Methods of Evaluation/Measurement(6.12). The appearance of this third item under the evaluation heading to rate above 6.00 emphasizes the importance all respondents place on evaluation. ICA(6.74), AEJMC(6.63) and SCA(6.60) members rated this topic higher than senior practitioners or IABC members(both 6.24).

Credibility(6.11). This second highest topic under the heading "Ethics and Law" affirms the importance of this basic aspect of ethics for most respondents; interestingly, ICA and SCA members rated credibility below 6.00 at 5.80 and 5.84 respectively.

Societal Forces Affecting Public Relations(6.10). Educators gave this variable a higher rating(6.37) than either young practitioners(6.06) or senior people(6.14).

Problem/Opportunity Analysis(6.07). This is the third of four topics under "Planning" to rate above 6.00 on the 1 to 7 scale. ICA members rated it highest(6.41) and professionals with 13 or more years of practice rated it lowest(5.96) of all demographic groups.

Community Relations(6.01). Associate members rated this highest(6.23) and Accredited and senior members rated it lowest(5.90 and 5.95), perhaps reflecting younger members' greater involvement in community relations compared to more senior members whose concerns are for a larger scope. This topic, the second of three under "Specialization," rated above 6.00, was only one tenth a percentage above "Employee Relations" to which it is closely related.

Budgeting(6.01). This seems to be more highly rated among senior teachers and younger PRSA members, and IABC practitioners all of whom rated it above 6.13. ICA members and senior practitioners--with 13+ years in practice--rated budgeting below 5.90.

Duties of Public Relations Practitioners(6.00). This single topic under the heading "the PR Field" which rated 6.00 and above on the 1 to 7 scale, led the next highest--Professional Development--rated 5.53. Understanding the PR Department and the PR Firm and general qualification were the other topics under this heading, all of which rated below 6.00.

Employee Relations(6.00). All demographic groups in the study rated this topic above 6.00 except the 227 Accredited members who placed it at 5.90 in importance.

At the other end of the rating scale, only three topics rated below 5.00 on the 1 to 7 scale, all of them courses in Liberal Arts or General Education. The subjects perceived as least important are criminal justice(2.95), Physical and Biological Sciences(3.81) and Mathematics, Statistics and or Computer Sciences(4.94).

FACTOR ANALYSIS OF CURRICULUM TOPICS: A Further Analysis

The "Factor" procedure in SPSSX was used to analyze--as variables--the 68 course parts, described above. An oblique rotation with a forced six factor solution was specified according to eigenvalues produced. In addition, a reliability procedure produced a standardized alpha for each of the factors. Results of this analysis revealed five factors with acceptable relaibility scores of 75% or above. Labels for all factors were determined by asking four senior level public relations classes to suggest a name for each list of topics loaded on each factor. The headings below reflect a consensus of those suggestions.

Factor 1 exhibited a higher eigenvalue than any of the other factors and an unacceptably low reliability, which reflects a characteristic of the factor analysis model: the first factor for which commonality converged reveals a strong relationship with all other variables, whereas the other factors reveal a stronger internal relationship. That is to say that factor 1 infers that there is a category in public relations education that relates to all other course parts in a way that "administration" might relate to the practice of public relations. This relationship has a low reliability. However, there is a strong consistency among the course parts that loaded on the other five factors.

Factor 1. "Administration" (Reliability 40% --alpha=.64)

Topics loaded on this factor:

TOPIC	FACTOR LOADINGS
Assigning authority/responsibility	.5
Compliance/regulatory agencies	.5
Use of external research services/ consultants	.4

Factor 2. "Public Relations Tools/Techniques" (Rel. 84%-- alpha=.92)

Topics loaded on this factor:

TOPIC	FACTOR LOADINGS
Corporate(graphic)identity	.7
Photography and film making	.7
Meetings/workshops/seminars/conventions	.7
Working with outside suppliers	.7
Other special events	.6
Planning ,writing, producing, delivering AV, electronic, multi-media communication to audiences	.6

Layout and graphics	.6
Training spokespersons	.6
Employee/internal communication	.6
Speechwriting/speech making/bureaus	.6
Planning, writing, producing, delivering print communication to audiences	.6
New PR tools and techniques(cable TV, satellite, word processing, etc.	.6
Controlled(advertising)communication	.6
One-time incidents/crisis situations	.6
Feedback systems	.6
Public relations programs	.5

Factor 3. "P R Duties" (Reliability 76%--alpha=.87)

TOPICS	FACTOR LOADINGS
Duties of the P R practitioner	.7
The P R Department	.7
The P R Firm	.6
Activities of the P R dept./firm	.6
Activities of the employer/client	.6
Qualifications/education needed	.6
Professional development	.5
Timetables/calendaring	.5

Factor 4. "P R Specializations" (Reliability 81%--alpha=.90)

TOPICS	FACTOR LOADINGS
Consumer relations	-.7
International public relations	-.7
Community relations	-.7
Public Affairs/lobbying	-.7
Financial/shareholder relations	-.6
Employee relations	-.6
Issue tracking	-.6
Fundraising	-.6
Focus group interviews	-.6
Issues management	-.5
Crisis planning	-.5
Historical research	-.5
Publicity and media relations	-.5
Media analysis/clipping analysis	-.5

Factor 5. "P R Comm'n Theory" (Reliability 76%--alpha=.87)

TOPICS	FACTOR LOADINGS
Persuasion	-.7
Communication theory	-.6
Message strategy	-.6
Social forces affecting P R	-.6
Organizational philosophy/culture	-.6
History of PR	-.5
Planning theory/models	-.5
Propaganda	-.5
Nature and role of P R	-.5
Ethics/codes of practice	-.5
Audience segmentation	-.5
Interpersonal communication	-.5
Public relations law	-.5
Credibility	-.4

Factor 6. "Planning and Evaluation" (Reliability 81%--alpha=.90)

TOPICS	FACTOR LOADINGS
Measuring program effectiveness	.8
Tools and methods of evaluation	.8
Success/performance evaluation	.8
Reporting results	.7
Decision making based on results	.7
Measuring staff/counsel effectiveness	.7
Social/communication/employee audits	.6
Setting goals	.6
Problem/opportunity analysis	.5
Performance measurement	.5
Fact finding	.5
Campaigns	.5
Budgeting	.5
Opinion polls/surveys	.5

FINAL STATISTICS

	CUM %	% OF VARIANCE	h2
FACTOR 1	30.5	30.5	.35
2	35.1	4.6	.38
3	38.3	3.2	.36
4	41.1	2.8	.34
5	43.3	2.2	.54
6	45.6	2.2	.34

DISCUSSION

No attempt has been made in this paper to establish significance for mean scores on the seven point scale. The literature generally relies on replication to establish such significance. Inter-item reliability in this study is quite high(Alpha=.96 for all variables), but this is only a test of consistency.

Rating scales have at least two inherent weaknesses: the ease in responding to the scale may "reduce [the] respondent's willingness to make more precise distinctions about the relative importance of the valued qualities," and "response style" or "response sets" may restrict the range of scale points marked by respondents which may produce "spuriously positive correlations among ratings."[4] These influences seem to be present in our study, with mean scores ranging between 2.95 and 6.67, that is,

respondents tended to regard all topics as important; whether there is a significant difference between a mean score of 5.00 and 6.00 must be left to further replication of this study.

The rating scale is probably as valid a technique to measure essentiality of the course parts as a ranking scale might have been. Alwin and Krosnick find that, "rating and ranking techniques may be interchangable for the purpose of measuring aggregate preference orderings."[8]

With the above question of significance unanswered, one may speculate on the differences in mean scores among various respondent groups; respondents generally reflected the perspective of their own career level: younger practitioners tended to give greater importance to the entry level skills required of them; senior level practitioners tended to discount entry level skills and place greater importance on management and social perspective. SCA members placed greater importance on audience segmentation than practitioners, though all educators tended to agree with SCA members on this point.

The factor analysis suggests a stronger consensus on skills topics than on management functions and in the importance respondents gave to corresponding course parts. However, such a consensus should not be construed necessarily as a preferred or ideal arrangement of the contents of a public relations curriculum. Respondents seem to have a higher agreement on the tools and techniques that make up the practitioner's normal day than on the more theoretical aspects of public relations. The

factor with the highest reliability clearly involves "skills" rather than the more substantive aspects of practice.

Other aspects of public relations practice also come in for significant notice in the factor loadings; duties and specializations reasonablly make up what the student needs to know to be a productive employee. One might question some of the topics that loaded under specialization--issue tracking, issue management, focus group interviews--for example. Yet, these are indeed activities that generally are specialties that not every practitioner uses. That Communication Theory, emerged as a factor, reflects the importance of "theory" among the respondents, and shows what might be regarded as elements that should be considered as a part of "theory." Planning and evaluation as a factor joins what are usually treated separately in the formula for public relations activities. There may be reasons to look again at the similarity of these two elements.

OPEN END RESPONSES

Responses to an open ended invitation to "write a brief statement" on the "central purpose of undergraduate education in public relations" were consistent with the findings above. Writing and internship tended to predominate in the comments offered. One respondent suggested that the "public relations practitioner/counselor must, by definition, be a jack-of-all-trades" and "a master of a good many of them."

A thoughtful respondent suggested that public relations education should "provide communication skills training, engage

students in pre-professional experiences through class exercises, internships, professional association involvement--give them well-rounded educational experience (liberal arts perspective), and teach them problem-solving(think analytically and critically)." Another wrote that such an education should "provide students the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, values, and skills needed for productive and socially responsible, professional careers in public relations, and for continued learning and personal growth. Frequent words and phrases respondents used to describe the ideal educational product included: well rounded, entry level skills, problem solving, generalist, think strategically, curiosity, knows how to learn, possesses judgment, understands business, has integrity, knows the "language of the field," and the body of knowledge, can recognize what is in the public interest. There were pleas to emphasize journalism and to deemphasize journalism. There were comments skepltical of the field and of the questionnaire. There was one comment that public relations education belonged only at the graduate level.

Of the 544 respondents 334 took the trouble to write an opinion on the purpose of public relations education at the undergraduate level. These responses, as with the other 544, reflect a deep concern for public relations education at the undergraduate level, and they represented a broad spectrum of public relations educators and practitioners.

ENDNOTES

1 Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, International Association of Business Communicators, International Communication Association and Speech Communication Association.

2 The mailing list breakdown was as follows:

Friends of PRSSA		178
Commission members		25
PRSA Educational Affairs Committee		17
PRSA Accreditation Board		13
PRSA Continuing Education Board		10
PRSA Leadership list		310
PRSA Educators Section		184
PRSA Professional Advisors		104
PRSA Associate members		553
sub total		1,394
Section members		
Public Affairs	21	
Corporate	96	
Educational Institutions	15	
Associations	24	
Health	27	
Financial Institutions	15	
Consumer Affairs	7	
Government	25	
Investor Relations	15	
Social Services	8	
Utilities	16	
Counselors Academy	35	
sub total	304	
AEJMC Public Relations Division		330
IABC Academy members		74
Additional names resulting from PRJ article		5
sub total		409
list total		2,108
unduplicated		1,500

Estimated unduplicated mailing list by category:

Public Relations Educators	400
Senior Practitioners	550
Associate members	550

3 Aranoff and Baskin, Public Relations: Profession and Practice. West, 1983; Cutlip, Center and Broom,

Effective Public Relations. 6th ed., Prentice Hall, 1982; Grunig and Hunt, Managing Public Relations. Holt Rinehart, 1984; Nager and Allen, Public Relations Management By Objectives. Longman, 1983; Newsom and Scott, This is PR: Realities of Public Relations. 3rd ed. Wadsworth. 1981; Seitel, The Practice of Public Relations. Merrill, 1984; Simon, Public Relations: Concepts and Practice. 3rd ed. Wiley, 1984.

4 Alwin, Duane F. and Jonn A. Kronsnick, "The Measurement of Values in Surveys: A Comparison of Ratings and Rankings." Public Opinion Quarterly 49 (Winter 1985): 535-552.

5 Ibid., The authors used a factor analysis to explore the "latent dimensions" of the differences between rating scales and ranking scales. While they did find differences in the "latent factors underlying" rating and ranking measurements, they conclude: "Although ranking methods tend to be preferred for measuring social values, the empirical evidence available from past research suggests that rating techniques may be used just as effectively.(548)"